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LEADERSHIP MAKES A DIFFERENCE: NIMITZ AND THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

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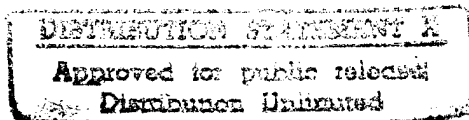
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Despite overwhelming odds, it is often the operational commander's qualitative leadership that decides the outcome of a major operation or campaign. Through showing such traits as vision and courage during the planning phase, the operational commander establishes the unity of effort necessary to achieve theater objectives. Despite technologies available to military leaders today, qualitative leadership is as relevant today as during the Second World War. To illustrate this point, a historical study looks at Admiral Chester W. Nimitz' operational leadership during the planning phase for the Battle of Midway. Examples include how Nimitz selected and sold his objectives; chose and supported his subordinates; took risks in assigning forces; planned and executed command, control, and communications; and developed a team committed to his vision through the planning process. The conclusion is that Nimitz' qualitative leadership was central to the Battle of Midway being the decisive Pacific War battle that enabled the United States to shift to the offensive. This study is relevant for current and future operations and campaigns since today's military tends to focus on technological advances to the detriment of valuing qualitative leadership in operational commanders.

# LEADERSHIP MAKES A DIFFERENCE: NIMITZ AND THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

## INTRODUCTION

On June 4, 1942 the tide of the Pacific War changed at the Battle of Midway. According to H.P. Wilmott in his historical sketch of Japanese and Allied Pacific strategies, this was the turning point in the war where ". . . the United States was transformed from a power in the Pacific to the power of the Pacific. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Before this engagement, the Japanese enjoyed a series of unchecked successes. With extremely limited resources, the United States (U.S.) struggled to stem the advances of the overwhelmingly superior Japanese fleet while attempting to balance the objectives of a two-theater war. In short, the Japanese had all the odds in their favor to succeed in their quest for the tiny Central Pacific atoll.

Several factors led to the Japanese defeat at Midway. Wilmott relates that, "For reasons that will always defy rational analysis, Yamamoto insisted upon a tactical deployment that incorporated every possible risk and weakness and left his forces inferior to the enemy at the point of contact. . . ." <sup>2</sup> A second factor was the United States' superior intelligence gathering capability. <sup>3</sup> The factor central to the thesis of this paper was the operational leadership of Admiral (ADM) Chester W. Nimitz.

Although poor Japanese planning and tactical errors influenced the outcome at Midway, Nimitz' operational leadership during the planning phase for the battle changed the course of the war. The purpose of this paper is to show through a study of Nimitz' *qualitative* leadership traits and skills that, despite overwhelming odds, it is often the operational commander's leadership that decides the outcome of an operation or campaign. Additionally, effective leadership is as important in today's technological age as it was during the Second World War. The planning phase of the Battle of Midway is the study's focus because it is during this phase that the operational leader displays the vision, courage, and ability to develop the unity of effort necessary to achieve victory.

## VISION

Operational leadership includes all the decisions and actions by the operational commander that translate national or theater-strategic goals and tasks into militarily achievable operational or strategic objectives in a given theater of operations.<sup>4</sup> To accomplish this, the operational leader must possess a vision that focuses and anticipates future events and guides his plan. Following the Battle of Coral Sea, there was much guesswork about the future direction of Japanese efforts. It was generally accepted that they would continue their attempts to gain a foothold in the Southwest Pacific. Nimitz

prepared to concentrate all U.S. naval forces in defense of this theater since intelligence estimates indicated the North and Central Pacific regions would be quiet. However, by mid-May Pacific Fleet intelligence estimates showed that the Japanese planned a major invasion of Midway. The consensus, outside Nimitz' intelligence gatherers, was that this estimate was not true. It took Nimitz more than a week to convince his superiors that Midway was the primary target with a simultaneous diversionary attack against the Aleutian Islands. Once he accomplished this, Nimitz believed that the Japanese had two objectives. Besides securing the atoll for future logistic support, the Japanese wanted to goad the Pacific Fleet into action.<sup>5</sup> Nimitz did not disappoint them. He committed almost all of his assets to the defense of Midway. The vision that Nimitz possessed strongly influenced his decision and follow-on plan. Despite the apparent superiority of the Japanese forces in almost every category of combatant, Nimitz knew that Midway was the place to make a stand.

Another example of the vision which characterized Nimitz' leadership was the manner in which he dealt with the Japanese invasion of the Aleutian Islands.<sup>6</sup> Nimitz considered making a stand in the Aleutians since he knew that the Japanese would deploy far fewer forces there than to Midway. At this stage of the conflict, a sure U.S. victory would build confidence and enthusiasm for the forces at sea and the home front. Another option Nimitz considered divided available forces and provided

resistance on both fronts. A third possibility employed all available forces at Midway and ceded the Aleutians to the aggressors.

Committed to his vision, Nimitz dispatched a small force to the Aleutians and threw the bulk of his fleet into opposing the Midway invasion. Had the Americans lost, this decision would have been disastrous.

### COURAGE

In On War, Carl von Clausewitz stated that "War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty."<sup>7</sup> To lead in time of war, while operating in the *fog of uncertainty*, requires uncommon courage. The courage to develop a vision, plan, and take action based upon that vision requires an individual who is no stranger to confronting chance and probability. Nimitz repeatedly displayed uncommon courage in planning for the defense of Midway.

First, Nimitz displayed courage in his selection of subordinates and the support he provided to them. In his biography, Nimitz, E. B. Potter describes a lesson Nimitz learned before Midway ". . . he made it his firm practice, once a commander had departed on a mission with an approved operation plan, not to send out any directive or advice as to how the mission should be carried out."<sup>8</sup> As such, the selection of

subordinates was a serious matter that required careful consideration and absolute confidence in those selected. In several cases, Nimitz selected individuals over the expressed objections of his chain of command. For example, Nimitz retained Lieutenant Commander (LCDR) Edwin T. Layton, who was the intelligence officer on the former Commander in Chief, Pacific (CinCPAC) staff during the Pearl Harbor debacle. Although everyone expected Layton's removal, Nimitz judged that he was a valuable asset and retained him over the objections of many.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the brilliant cryptographic analysis of LCDR Joseph J. Rochefort might not have come to light if Nimitz had deferred to the influence of Admiral (ADM) Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations. King had a personal distaste for Rochefort and was not inclined to accept his estimates.<sup>10</sup> In The Pacific Campaign, Dan van der Vat points out that "It did not take him [Nimitz] long to appreciate the worth of the decidedly eccentric and casually insubordinate cryptanalyst . . . an assessment which was soon to change the course of history."<sup>11</sup> Also, Nimitz selected Rear Admiral (RADM) Frank J. Fletcher to command all carrier forces at Midway, despite Fletcher's reputation for timidity and King's strong reservations. Nimitz made the assignment based on a personal interview and an appraisal of Fletcher's record.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Nimitz swam against the tide with his nomination of RADM Raymond A. Spruance to command Task Force 16. Though Spruance did not have the aviation background thought necessary to command a carrier task



force, Nimitz believed his intellectual capabilities outweighed this lack of experience.<sup>13</sup>

Another manner in which Nimitz displayed tremendous courage was by his decision to accept the veracity of Rochefort's intelligence estimates concerning Midway and the Aleutian Islands. Clausewitz wrote that "By 'intelligence' we mean every sort of information about the enemy and his country--the basis, in short, of our own plans and operations. If we consider the actual basis of this information, how unreliable and transient it is, we soon realize that war is a flimsy structure that can easily collapse and bury us in ruins."<sup>14</sup> Neither the Washington intelligence community nor the allies agreed with Rochefort's assessment of Japanese objectives. This made it difficult for Nimitz to convince King that Midway was the objective. Despite King's reluctance, Nimitz set about to detect, beyond any doubt, that Rochefort was correct and to plan in earnest for the defense of Midway. Van der Vat relates that Nimitz ". . . boldly decided to back Rochefort's team to the hilt by staking the entire available American carrier strength of three on his judgment."<sup>15</sup> By the second half of May, Nimitz convinced King and the plan for the Battle of Midway was well underway. Nimitz proved correct, and the courage required to take the actions that he did cannot be overemphasized.

Once Nimitz decided that Midway was the primary Japanese objective, it required great courage to make the decision to defend the atoll in the face of overwhelming Japanese strength.

Many felt that the better course of action was to cede Midway to the Japanese and then counterattack the lines of communication that they required to sustain their new asset.<sup>16</sup> Instead, as van der Vat wrote, Nimitz decided to confront ". . . the greatest concentration of naval tonnage since the British battle fleet at Jutland . . . For Nimitz to think in terms of 'setting a trap' for this most modern of the world's navies can be seen as impertinent, but that is what he set out to do."<sup>17</sup>

It also took great courage for Nimitz to send limited assets to defend the Aleutians because he knew that public outcry would be strong if more U.S. territory fell to the Japanese. The risks associated with his decision to send a small defense force to the North Pacific and concentrate his forces at Midway were huge.<sup>18</sup> Consider the public and political outcry had Midway fallen.

Having selected a plan for the defense of Midway and the North Pacific, Nimitz displayed bold courage regarding force employment. The uncovering of the Japanese plan cast doubt among those in Washington and on the CinCPAC staff that the decoded messages might be fakes planted to mislead the Americans. It did not make sense to them for the Japanese to employ almost their entire Combine Fleet to seize Midway and two, insignificant Aleutian Islands.<sup>19</sup> Despite the possibility that the doubters were correct, Nimitz set about to launch an all-out defense of Midway. In so doing, he abandoned his defense of the Southwest Pacific, Hawaiian Islands, and East

Pacific. He assigned the limited forces discussed above to the North Pacific, although he firmly believed an Aleutian invasion was imminent. The risk that Nimitz accepted underscores the courage that it took to trust his instincts.

Nimitz displayed brazen courage when he formed his battle plan to send two carriers against the Japanese four. Wilmott discovered during his research that, expecting only two carriers, ". . . the Americans knew that they could not risk a stand-up action. Because they could not trade blows with the enemy the Americans had to hit and run."<sup>20</sup> This battle concept is noteworthy when considered within the context of the total balance of forces. Nimitz sent everything he had into the fray. This might be considered the norm if a leader is defending his homeland, which Nimitz was not. Undoubtedly, this decision required overwhelming faith and courage.

Finally, not all operational commanders possess the courage to allow *decentralized execution* once the planning phase is completed. This principle is key to success at the operational level.<sup>21</sup> Through his decision not to get involved in the tactical evolution of the Battle of Midway, Nimitz followed the principle of decentralized execution. This was especially noteworthy in light of the lack of confidence which King had in Fletcher and Spruance. Yet, Potter recorded that, even when he received puzzling reports from the field during the battle, Nimitz refused to intervene. Instead, he stated to his staff, "I'm sure Spruance has a better sense of what's going on out

there than we have here. I'm sure he has a very good reason for this. We'll learn all about it in the course of time. . . ."<sup>22</sup>

## UNITY OF EFFORT

Clausewitz stated:

. . . when it is not a question of acting oneself but of persuading others in discussion, the need is for clear ideas and the ability to show their connection with each other. So few people have yet acquired the necessary skill at this that most discussions are a futile bandying of words; either they leave each man sticking to his own ideas or they end with everyone agreeing, for the sake of agreement, on a compromise with nothing to be said for it."<sup>23</sup>

There is no question that Nimitz intuitively understood this principle by the manner in which he established unity of effort in planning for the Battle of Midway. Through listening to ideas; developing command, control, and communications; and personally engendering loyalty, he built a strong team committed to his operational objectives.

In harmony with Sun Tzu, who said more than 2,000 years ago ". . . the wise general in his deliberations must consider both favorable and unfavorable factors. . . . The enlightened deliberate,"<sup>24</sup> Nimitz listened to his subordinates in planning meetings that began with his closest staff members, expanded to the entire staff, and culminated with a conference in which

subordinate tactical commanders took part. Based on his research, van der Vat describes Nimitz as ". . . pleasant and friendly, always calm, unpretentious, even humble, and led by example. The quiet manner concealed excellent judgement of both men and issues, a first rate intelligence and an unassuming self-confidence which enabled him to take sometimes startling decisions and stick to them."<sup>25</sup> His conferences were normally short, to the point, and provided him with the opportunity to listen to and accept expert advice.<sup>26</sup> At the final planning conference on May 27, information was shared and recommendations from subordinates were considered and frequently accepted. In essence, the plan became *their plan*, and loyalty and motivation increased. The meetings established unity of effort, clarified mission objectives and tasks, and made success possible.

Nimitz paid special attention to command, control, and communications throughout the planning and battle phases to provide essential support for unity of effort. For example, he made a personal visit to Midway in early May to examine the facility and existing communications capabilities.<sup>27</sup> Another example is that he stressed communications throughout the battle to the point that he repeated crucial information several times to ensure it was received by all concerned. Also, despite the requirement that the carriers remain undetected prior to the engagement, Nimitz ensured they received all the necessary information to make tactical decisions by transmitting it "in the blind." Finally, Potter discovered that Nimitz inspired

subordinates during the battle with messages such as "The situation is developing as expected. Carriers, our most important objective, should be located soon. Tomorrow may be the day you give them the works."<sup>28</sup>

Nimitz also fostered unity of effort by winning loyalty to himself through his personal actions. For example, when he visited Midway, he personally asked the commanders what they required to defend the atoll and satisfied those needs to the best of his ability. To further solidify their allegiance and perhaps spur them to uncommon valor, he promoted them before the engagement.<sup>29</sup>

Another example is that Nimitz personally entered the Pearl Harbor dry dock to persuade the shipyard workers that he needed the U.S.S. *Yorktown* at sea in three days.<sup>30</sup> The *Yorktown* deployed and proved essential to the victory at the Battle of Midway. Without the unity of effort born of Nimitz' visit to the dry dock, there is no question that it would have taken the original estimated ninety days to get *Yorktown* underway.

Finally, Nimitz' personal selection of his task force and tactical subordinates, discussed previously under Courage, led to their loyalty to him and unity of effort. Fletcher and Spruance proved this by performing superbly even though some felt that the loss of ADM William "Bull" F. Halsey prior to the battle was a precursor to disaster. Nimitz' decisions to trust Fletcher and Spruance probably increased the odds for success at Midway because Halsey's impulsiveness and boldness might have

led to disaster under the same circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

Once everyone adopted the plan and Nimitz knew his subordinates had the necessary information, he continuously reinforced unity of effort through supporting decentralized execution. Potter concluded that, "CinCPAC and his staff had shot their bolt [during the planning phase for Midway]. They had deployed available forces to the best of their ability to meet impossible odds. There was little more they could do. . . ."<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Paul D. Dull, in his book on the history of the Imperial Japanese Navy, stated that "Midway was the 'decisive' battle of the war in the Pacific."<sup>33</sup> It erased Japan's advantage in the Pacific, brought them to something approaching equality, and enabled the United States to shift to the offensive.<sup>34</sup> The vision, courage, and manner in which Nimitz established unity of effort during the planning phase for Midway were key to the defense of the atoll and the shift within the war. Consistent with Gene Nielsen's writing on command and control, Nimitz' qualitative leadership was the ". . . glue that binds together, creating a synergistic effect. . . ."<sup>35</sup>

While this is a historical study, the importance of qualitative leadership traits and skills is as relevant today as it was in 1942. In his paper, "Operational Leadership," Milan

Vego points out that:

The principal requirements for a successful operational leader are strong personality and character traits coupled with excellent professional education and training. The roles of the operational commander will not change no matter what technological advances will be introduced into the decision making process. Computers and new informational technology can only aid, but not replace the human elements, and it is a dangerous misconception to think otherwise.<sup>36</sup>

There exists in today's military a technological lure that is increasingly powerful. While there is no intent to devalue the significance of the improved capabilities presented by this technology, it is crucial that they not be embraced at the expense of sound operational leadership. For example, it is generally accepted that success at the operational level occurs through decentralized execution. At the same time, technological advances in satellite imagery and communications that provide up-to-the-minute situational awareness and enable senior military and civil leaders to do real-time, current operations planning. While these new capabilities provide forces with a better understanding of battlefield conditions, they also tempt senior leaders to control execution from their level, and reduce the initiative required from their subordinate commanders. Vego believes that, "While this situation can be justified to some degree in Military Operations Other than War(MOOTW), it is much more detrimental in a war."<sup>37</sup>



Additionally, often overlooked is that the operational leadership challenges that faced Nimitz before and during the Battle of Midway exist today. Because technological advances enhance the operational commander's ability to find *quantitative* comparisons, such as the number of enemy weapons and platforms, these comparisons are often overemphasized to the detriment of the need for sound, *qualitative* leadership. As demonstrated in this paper, Nimitz used his clarity of mission, courage of convictions, and confidence in self and subordinates to stay the course and overcome the overwhelming quantitative advantages the Japanese enjoyed. The U.S. Armed Forces need to recognize and value these same elements of qualitative leadership in operational commanders today, in order to counter the possibility that an enemy will use them to overcome the quantitative advantages the United States currently enjoys.

The bottom line is that superior operational leadership overcame superior quantitative capabilities in the Battle of Midway. This was not the first time this happened over the course of history . . . nor is it likely to be the last.

## NOTES

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